Approaching the thoughts and feelings of conscience with qualitative and quantitative methods

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The project we are presenting here is about the question: How does our conscience function and express itself in everyday-life situations?

“Conscience” is not a commonly used term in academic sociology. It appears to be too vague, available only in a wide range of personalized, even idiosyncratic manifestations and interpretations that cannot be abstracted into coherent analytical form. Nonetheless, we have opted to make use of this term as a heuristic concept, precisely in order to benefit from the rich set of meanings it provides and the variety of analytical dimensions it comprehends. In particular we hope to gain better insight into the multifaceted interplay of moral judgment, moral attachment, moral feelings, and moral behaviour.

According to the dictionary definition, “conscience” refers to a sense of what is right or wrong, good or bad. More specifically we may say: “conscience” refers to the capacity and ongoing readiness of a person to evaluate, prospectively or retrospectively, his or her behaviour, thoughts and wishes in light of some accepted standard or norm, and to respond to a perceived discrepancy with feelings of anxiety, remorse or regret, particularly with shame and guilt.

The exact nature of the standards applied and the feelings evoked are left open in this preliminary definition. There may be cases of non-moral guilt (cf. Morris), and negative feelings may not only follow from evaluative reflections but may initialize or prompt such reflections. Occasionally, negative feelings of this kind may arise even in cases where careful reasoning does not produce or confirm any negative judgment about one’s doings. And in other circumstances we may not experience a “bad”, but rather a “clear” or “good” conscience which contributes to the enhancement of our self.
At this point, I will not engage in further theoretical reflections, rather I will use the few minutes left to me to present some of the more concrete questions which we will take up in our empirical research:

(1) First, what are typical or untypical situational settings, occasions and circumstances in which our conscience is activated or makes itself felt in one way or another? Do they primarily involve private personal relationships, some questionable behaviour directed against family-members, friends or acquaintances? Different kinds of settings are given in public places, where we encounter and behave towards people whom we most likely will never meet again. A third type of situation is given within institutionalized settings, in particular those in which we perform functional roles that are dominated by standards of achievement and success which may downplay or neutralize the import or relevance of moral rules. Our conscience might also get affected by situations we have not been actively participating in, but which are being presented to us – by another person or by the media, by pictures, by news or by written text – and which may, for whatever reason, bring forward feelings and questions regarding our responsibilities and commitments towards other people outside our immediate reach.

(2) Next, what are the standards – principles, ideals, or rules – which we implicitly or conscientiously apply to judge our own behaviour? Moral rules are the first candidate. But shame may also be governed, perhaps even more so, by non-moral rules. And some scholars have advanced the idea that even guilt may not follow exclusively from the violation of accepted moral rules. But if they in fact serve as the standard of evaluation, what type of morality do they present in a given case? We are usually involved in more than just one “moral universe”. What happens when we are confronted with conflicting moral rules? Do they tend to neutralize each other and therewith neutralize our conscience as well, leading us perhaps even into moral disengagement? On the other hand, how much – or rather how little – reflective thinking is there to be observed, after all? To what extent do such standards get articulated; or are they more or less inexplicable to the actor, even when questioned?
Third, what actually are the emotions, or “moral feelings”, that come into play in such situations? In the literature we find long and diverse listings of categories and definitional criteria to sort them out and delimit their respective meanings, most prominently guilt versus shame, or remorse versus regret, but many others as well [e.g., embarrassment, ridicule, disgrace, compunction ….] They all refer to some unpleasant or even painful affect, usually connected with some negative judgment regarding one’s own behaviour or even one’s global self; but in certain constellations they might also be elicited by another person’s behaviour, e.g., we may feel shame for somebody else. We want to find out how our interviewees actually describe and classify their emotions, and how these emotions stimulate thoughts and function as a motivational force to act or not to act in a certain way. We will also pay attention to positive feelings that follow from doing something good, feelings of relief and satisfaction, of self-affirmation, empowerment, honour or pride. But we will also consider the possibility that in some situations our conscience may operate with very little emotional impact at all.

Finally, as already indicated, we want to find out more about the processes in which moral judgment, emotions, and behaviour stimulate and bear upon each other, and how this interaction is related to the characteristics of specific situations, which themselves need to be defined and processed by the actors involved herein. One question which is of particular interest here is: how do we communicate with others in this process, including people that originally were not participants in the situation. Whom do we ask for advice or consolation? How, if at all, do we communicate with those we have hurt? Does this spoil or enhance our relationship with them? … I could go on with this for a while, but I stop at this point and hand over to Sylvia who will talk about the methods we apply, and some preliminary results or insights obtained so far ….
I want to give you a short overview of the basic set-up of our empirical research. Presently, we are carrying out a pre-test, which is composed of two parts: A written questionnaire, which was sent to a random sample of employees working at the University of Halle and which was answered by roughly 100 persons. Additionally, we will conduct 10 qualitative interviews with some of these respondents, which will be selected on the basis of their statements in the questionnaire.

The insights from this pre-test will be used from next year on, when we will start our main investigation with a sample of 4.000 residents of the city of Halle – hoping that around 1.000 will respond. We intend to conduct an additional series of qualitative interviews with 30 persons taken from this sample.

The questionnaire in our pre-test comprises mostly standardized but also some open questions. Firstly, we were interested in the perceived frequency of experiences of conscience in everyday life. As you can see, most respondents chose the category “every now and then” (62,9 %) and just one person explained to have no experiences of conscience at all (1 %) [“often”: 20,6 %, “seldom”: 15,5 %]. While this distribution shows no gender difference, an open follow-up question was answered more often by women than by men [64,3 % vs. 43,6 %]. In this question we asked our respondents to describe a situation in which they lately perceived their conscience being active in one way or other – I will present some of these answers to you in a moment.

Persons who did not answer this question mostly explained that such a description would be “too tedious” (46,5 %): this might mean that it is too time-consuming, but also that the articulation of one’s experiences of conscience does not always come easily. Another 37 % (37,5 %) explained that they considered this question to be “too indiscreet”, and 16 % said that they “can’t remember” such a situation lately.

Interestingly, more than 50 % of these people (who did not answer the open question on experiences of conscience) answered two other open questions on situations, in which they “would possibly feel" the emotions of guilt and shame respectively. This might be interpreted as a first sign, that experiences of conscience are indeed something different, than just to have a feeling of guilt or shame.

Besides these open questions we used a variety of standardized instruments. These include amongst others:
* a semantic differential for the emotions of guilt and shame [a first analysis of these differentials shows almost no differences],

* a scale constructed by psychologists to measure a person’s disposition to experience feelings of guilt and shame [originally an Italian scale by Battacchi et al.],

* the human value scale by Schwartz,

* the internal conversation scale by Margret Archer and

* some items measuring a respondent’s belief that there exist clear criteria for judging what is good or bad.

Finally, we employed three hypothetical scenarios, which confronted our respondents with situations, in which one might have problems to make a moral decision. The first scenario concerned a situation, in which a person would benefit from the concealment of a relative’s last will. The second scenario described the instrumental, potentially exploitive use of an acquaintance; and the third scenario concerned the break of a commercial agreement with a stranger to receive a larger benefit. We asked them to describe their imagined feelings in these situations, the decisions they would make and the reasons and arguments for their decisions.

While these hypothetical scenarios are a way to compare various kinds of moral reasoning and feeling between respondents, the answers to the open question on one’s own experiences reveal some of the mechanisms in the operation of conscience, that is: the processes of emotional and moral reflexivity in which it manifests itself.

In the remaining time, I want to present to you three short examples. The first example illustrates how one’s conscience may induce feelings which in turn may prevent the person from acting in a way which might relieve one’s conscience. One person reports:

> What gnaws at my own conscience is my own inability to keep in touch with people who mean a lot to me. This carries me to a point where I am afraid of contacting them at all.

This illustrates, that feelings which are induced by one’s conscience – one might say “moral feelings” – do not always work on behalf of just those values they themselves express, in this case: the maintenance of friendships.
Another example illustrates that even re-occurring experiences of conscience are not necessarily perceived as negative or burdensome. One woman describes her experiences in the following words:

*Feelings which are connected to conscience I have almost every day; as a mother, a partner, a worker etc. There are always things which are neglected […] I would like to be more approachable for those whom I care for […]*,

*nevertheless I feel good about my life […] I can live with my conscience even if it duns me constantly. Without [conscience] it would not work for me at all.*

This woman seems to recognize in her experiences of conscience those moral values – again and again – which are important to her; and this re-occurring recognition even seems to have become a value of its own. I would like to add that this woman is an exception, since other respondents who describe similar conflicts between work and family report rather negative evaluations of these experiences.

A last example may shed some light on the processes which might lead to a re-formulation or new balancing of moral orientations in face of certain experiences of one’s conscience.

One of our female respondents explicates that she has a *work contract since half a year* in a motivated team of *nice colleagues*.

For the first time she felt her conscience when she *wished to become pregnant*.

Although she said to herself *I have the right to it*, she felt *helpless* when she got a positive test result and got fearful of *the reactions of her colleagues*.

At the same time, she writes of her *happiness* and the *support* she got from *her family*.

In this case, the reference to her rights as well as to her private fortune may be interpreted as a sign, that she perceived her pangs of conscience as unjustified. Although it is an open question, whether she is able to articulate this moral experience further, one might assume that the support of her family encourages such a re-formulation.

I hope these few remarks have given you an impression of our project and the methods we apply. We just started the analysis of our pre-test questionnaire and we still await the qualitative interviews – so there is a lot of research ahead of us.
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Sylvia Terpe & Helmut Thome

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Definition of “conscience”

- a sense of what is right/wrong, good/bad

- a capacity and readiness to evaluate one’s behaviour, thoughts and wishes in light of some accepted (moral) standard

- the experience of a discrepancy (between standard and behaviour) evokes feelings of anxiety, remorse, regret, and particularly shame and guilt
Research questions

1. typical situational settings, occasions and circumstances, in which one’s conscience is activated

2. applied standards to judge behaviour, thoughts, wishes

3. “moral feelings”

4. interplay between moral judgments, moral emotions, motivation and behaviour (as related to the characteristics of the situational setting)
Empirical investigation

**Pre-Test (4/2011-3/2012)**
- a written questionnaire, employees at the university (n=100)
- 10 qualitative interviews

**Main investigation (4/2012-3/2014)**
- a written questionnaire for a random sample of 4,000 inhabitants of Halle
- 30 qualitative interviews

**Some results from the Pre-Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conscience activated how often</th>
<th>Open question on experiences of conscience</th>
<th>Reasons for not answering the open question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- never</td>
<td>was answered by …</td>
<td>- too tedious 46,5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- seldom</td>
<td></td>
<td>- too indiscreet 37,5 %</td>
</tr>
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<td>- every now and then</td>
<td>- women 64,3 %</td>
<td>- can’t remember 16,0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- often</td>
<td>- men 43,6 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- all 55,5 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ca. 50 % answered open questions on guilt & shame
Instruments in the questionnaire

- semantic differential of guilt and shame
- scale to measure disposition to feel guilt and shame
- human value scale by Schwartz
- internal conversation scale by Archer
- belief in clear criteria of good and bad

- three hypothetical scenarios:
  open questions on feelings, decisions and thoughts in these imagined situations
Examples from the open question on experiences of conscience

Example 1
What gnaws at my own conscience is my own inability to keep in touch with people who mean a lot to me. This carries me to a point where I am afraid of contacting them at all.

Example 2
Feelings which are connected to conscience I have almost every day; as a mother, a partner, a worker etc. there are always things which I have neglected [...] I would like to be more approachable for those whom I care for [...] , nevertheless I feel good about my life [...] I can live with my conscience even if it duns me constantly. Without [conscience] it would not work for me at all.

Example 3 (written in catchwords; a selection …)
- work contract since half a year, nice colleagues
- wished to become pregnant / I have the right to it
- positive test result: felt helpless and feared reaction of colleagues
- happiness and support from family